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We've gone too far

"It is no exaggeration to say that the foreign policy setbacks we are suffering all over the world are the consequences, to one extent or another, of the severe restraints placed upon our intelligence community."

The words are those of Dan Quayle, U.S. representative for Indiana's 4th District, who at this writing said he intended to introduce legislation "to revitalize" the nation's intelligence system.

Quayle, of course, is not alone in his opinions and intentions regarding covert activities of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Defense Intelligence Agency and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

Many members of the Congress, particularly since some of our foreign troubles become acute with the holding as hostages by the Iranian government some 50 Americans attached to the U.S. Embassy there, and the burning of the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan, are pressing for intelligence system changes.

As has been demonstrated all too clearly, Congress over-reacted in the wake of Watergate to make it extremely difficult for American intelligence to function with the necessary effectiveness to protect the nation's foreign interests.

The reaction was understandable, for the Watergate experience was one of the most frightening of its kind the country has faced. Some, politically motivated, would say it otherwise, but the hard facts are all too clear — there was corruption and abuse of power that was reaching toward the ultimate. That it did not go further — that it was stopped — was almost accidental.

But understandable or not,

Congress did over-react, and this over-reaction needs to be remedied.

The present restraints on the U.S. intelligence community are too severe. Quayle and others are urging repeal of the Hughes-Ryan amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1974. This legislation required that all covert activities be cleared with eight House and Senate committees. Given the propensity of a great many members of Congress to play the big shot with all who will listen, one can only imagine how this legislation increased the likelihood of security leaks. Eight committees of Congress? Good grief, we might just as well wipe out all intelligence activities.

Quayle also suggests we can institute criminal penalties for former intelligence community employees who deliberately divulge secrets. We can exempt from coverage under the Freedom of Information Act those CIA files that foreign agents are now obtaining to find out sensitive information regarding our own intelligence activities.

The Hoosier congressman believes with most of us that the Freedom of Information Act is a worthwhile reform, and should be saved, but we must protect additional files pertaining to intelligence operations.

There's small doubt that we have gone too far in weakening the nation's intelligence services, and that they now need to be strengthened. The task is not easy, for we need strong intelligence services and strong protection of our own individual freedoms at the same time.

Actually, the task is an ongoing one, and it requires the best we can give it for the continuation of our security and freedom.

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